

Rosalie Wild

October 21, 2010

## FLOWERS AND LIGHT



Tiffany Studios: "Twelve Light Lily Table Lamp", 1900-1910, favrile glass and bronze



Studio Tord Boontje: "Garland Light", 2002-present, etched brass

The "Twelve Light Lily Table Lamp" and the "Garland Light" are two lighting designs made of metal and shaped with floral motifs, but since they are separated by almost one hundred years, they are not nearly as similar as it might sound. At the same time, they share some common values that connect them across differences in material and form.

Louis Comfort Tiffany (American, 1848-1933) designed the Twelve Light Lily Table Lamp to be produced by Tiffany Studios. After studying painting in New York in the 1870s, and then working as an interior designer, he began his own workshop for making art in glass. He is known for his development of colored, mottled, and opalescent glass for lampshades, stained glass, and other household products, and even patented his 'favrile' process of producing iridescent glass in 1894. He was a key designer of the Art Nouveau style, a movement that looked toward natural forms and away from all historical revivalism. Art Nouveau encouraged harmony within and without designed spaces, prompting designers to work on an extensive range of products. The lamp's lilies would have to be reflected in all aspects of the room the lamp was

placed in, or vice-versa. The Art Nouveau movement also attempted to dissolve the boundaries between artists and craftspeople by crafting beautiful and useful objects for the home. The lamp has twelve incandescent light bulbs, each hung from a separate bronze “stem” that connects to the base that is constructed from cast bronze lily pads. Surrounding each light bulb is an iridescent glass shade that is long and narrowly tapered, flaring out at the edge to resemble a lily. The lamp was made mostly by hand, since both the bronze castings and the glass shades required extensive finishing. The lamp was probably quite costly even in its own time (and recently this lamp sold for \$21,000 at auction). It is also important to note that this lamp was designed when using electric light was just becoming popular. Gaslamps were common prior to the incandescent bulb, but they required an upright lightsource, a fixed position (since a pipe had to connect to the lamp), a chimney for smoke and a globe to protect the flame. This electric Tiffany table lamp is not only re-positionable, but each light is angled downward, which would have been impossible in a gas lamp. In the beginning of the electric bulb’s era, people thought that incandescent light was too bright: this might explain the cloudiness of the glass shades.

Tord Boontje (Dutch, 1968-present) designed the “Garland Light” in 2002, and it was first produced by Habitat and later by Artecnic. He has said that design should “communicate not only who we are, but also how we would like our world to be,” expressing his humanistic underpinnings. He is known for combining old and new forms, materials, technologies, and aesthetics, often in support of industrial design as a decorative art. Decoration, for Boontje, accesses a larger range of people’s emotions and thoughts, especially in home interiors, where decoration and design could offer therapeutic power. He is also inspired by fairy tales, magic, and storytelling. He studied design at both Design Academy Eindhoven in Holland as well as the Royal College of Art in Great Britain. The “Garland Light” is made out of acid-etched brass sheet by a photographic process that is used to make electronic components. It was probably

designed using a vector graphics program. The lamp is purchased as a flat rectangle, and the user separates the panel into a long strand of leafy and floral metal that can be tangled around the light bulb in any way the user pleases. The lamp costs \$85 now, although when it debuted it was only \$23. Hundreds of thousands of the “Garland Light” have been sold, and it was probably the turning point for Boontje’s career, since the light’s low price brought his work to a wider audience.

While both of these lamps could be classified as ‘ornamental’, they each fit into their surroundings in very different ways. Tiffany’s lily lamp was designed to be unified with its interior setting: it would blend seamlessly with many other nature-inspired, curved, ornamented and handcrafted objects, at both large and small scales. It might best be suited to a room covered in wallpaper that also depicts lilies, a cabinet with lily-shaped drawer pulls, and a carpet depicting other similar flora and fauna. The object is participating in a literal harmony with its designed surroundings, as well as a metaphorical harmony with Nature itself. In contrast, Boontje’s lamp is ornamental as a contrast to modern, hard-edged, geometric interior design. It might be best suited to a room with a sleek grey sofa, plain white walls, and minimal personal objects. Its reflectivity and ornate detail draws attention as a respite from what might be considered cold and dull about modern interiors.

For the Tiffany lamp, the ornamental quality is also a testament to workmanship: evidence that the human skill and care of a craftsman was injected into this lamp that now graces the living space of someone who can afford such well-crafted objects. This value of the handmade stems from William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement. The ornamental quality of Boontje’s “Garland Light” is more of a testament to technology, in the sense that the production of the object has been made feasible by new ways of creating line drawings in the computer and rapidly transferring the line drawing to a material and manufacturing process. This kind of production lowers the price of the lamp, making it much more accessible to a range of users. This might be

seen as a democratization of fine ornament, and could also be connected to William Morris' socialist aspirations. Both lamps evoke the Arts and Crafts ideal of combining the beauty of nature and art with the useful objects of the everyday.

The Garland Light is flat (at least at first) and very lightweight, while the Lily Lamp is quite heavy and bulky. Both are drawing inspiration from nature, but in different ways. The Tiffany lamp is closely referencing the actual form of a lily plant, but rendered in bronze, which couldn't be further from the delicate and light qualities of plant material. Boontje's light is also made of metal, but in a much more flexible and fragile format that references the precious and flourishing qualities of flowers, even though the flowers on the light are stylized and graphically simplified. The flexible and personalized nature of the Garland light is also reflective of the variance and adaptability found in nature, while the Lily lamp presents a much more static, singular look at nature: each Lily lamp is equally dazzling but in the exact same way because of the standardized casting process. Many Art Nouveau lamps were made from reproductions of popular sculptures of the era, since it was desirable to have an artist's 'masterpiece' in your own home, especially if it was made into a useful object such as a lamp. Boontje's lamp doesn't function in this way, because it is the end user who makes the Garland Light into a masterpiece or a tangled pile of metal (although I can't deny that some might recognize the Garland Light for its designer's merits and not the end user's).

Another important connection between these two lamps is their use of cutting-edge technology. In the Tiffany lamp, the incandescent bulb was new, and his design takes advantage of the electric bulb's allowance for non-vertical lights and non-fixed location. While those features distinguish it from previous gaslamps, the bulbs themselves are completely hidden by the glass lampshade, making the light softer and dimmer. In the Boontje lamp, the ability to generate and define complex patterns in the computer and easily transfer them into manufactured products was relatively new, and the design of the lamp takes advantage of that technological development: it is

intricate in such a way that could never be easily crafted by a human in the equivalent manufacturing time. The metal garland wraps around a bare lightbulb (which is a ubiquitous object now), and the shininess of the etched brass actually makes the light brighter and more sparkly. The difference between the low light of the Lily lamp and the high shine of the Garland light goes back to their relations to their surrounding interiors: the Lily lamp was intended to blend in with its surroundings and achieve an even level of decorative effort, while the Garland light was meant to stand out in the modern home and re-establish ornament in an un-embellished world.

What bonds these two lamps together, despite the century between them, is the sense of "magic" that each one holds. In the Lily lamp, the magic is partially from the glowing electric bulbs, but also from Tiffany's whimsical interpretation of natural forms. In the Garland light, the sparkling and delicate flowers seem ethereal, or as if they are magically emanating from the everyday lightbulb. Both objects call on the viewer to consider the wonders of the natural world, as well as the wonders of how the object itself was made.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Duncan, Alastair. Art Nouveau and Art Deco Lighting. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978. Print.

Margetts, Martina. Tord Boontje. New York: Rizzoli, 2006. Print.

Christopher, Wray. Art Nouveau Lamps & Fixtures. New York: Crown, 1989. Print.